

MEMORIES OF ITALY.

BY

A. G. HEATON.

WINTER OF 1881-1882.

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I.

O fellow-pilgrims by indulgent fate !
The days have come when we our paths must bend
From this fair kingdom where, in truth, so late
We came unknown, and part as friend from friend,
Ere mutual pleasures yet have reached an end,
And ere we kiss, alas ! a different hand
Of beautiful Italia, and attend,
Too soon, departure from her spell-bound land,
Ye for the west, and I from bright Venetia's strand.

II.

As birds in spring-time taking northern flight
Pause for a while in some fair spot to rest,
So here in courtly Florence we alight
After too brief a day of chat and jest,
Of genial fellowship the parting test,
From Rome's beguiling streets and azure skies,
Spared from the perils which her gates invest,
To view Art's palaces which proudly rise,
Wedded, though Arno's flood between their glory lies.

III.

Brief is the sunny winter that has sped
Above us in our wanderings, yet how long
The devious course unwearied feet have led
Amid the valleys of the land of song !
Amid each city's happy-natured throng,
The ruins of a world's immortal past,
The tombs of pleasure and the pomps of wrong
Which still to-day pathetically last
To teach forgetful men grim Destiny's forecast.

IV.

Yet, happily, men sadden not their days
With constant musing of the vague to be,
Saving the devots of exacting ways
Of duty and of penance, who would see
Sweet nature never from their bondage free ;
But open hearts and healthy lives dispel
The gloom of doubt with youth's beguiling glee,
And music drowns the dull cathedral bell,
And dancing feet glide on in palace and in dell.

V.

With smiles for leisure, we were often fain,
In thoughtful mood, to seek the pious hill
Where broods the Mother Church in troubled reign,
The dictates of her once resistless will
Now challenged at her portals. Proudly still
Guards she the treasures of a sumptuous youth,
Seeking in stubborn doctrine to fulfill
Her self-appointed toil with little ruth
For broader sight of heaven in nature's living truth.

VI.

How rare her riches and how wisely gleaned
When she controlled the better minds of earth,
When rank and talent for her blessing leaned,
And Knowledge, sheltered from the outer death
In cloisters, gave so rare an offspring birth.
Art, then, persuaded by her lavish gold,
Mid sensual living glorified the worth
Of all that saintly multitude of old,
And her indulgence kind redeemed a hundred fold.

VII.

Yet one appeared a cardinal in right
Of Art's high faith. St. Peter's stately dome
And vaulted aisles bear witness of the might
Of Buonarotti's genius, finding home
In unknown regions, and beguiled to come
To earth and re-create his visions strange
In that high chapel, Titan-thronged, where roam
Men from the ends of earth, and strive to change
Vainly the humble mind to that great spirit's range.

VIII.

We chanced, upon another day, to walk
At leisure o'er the excavated field
Of Rome's forensic fame, and there to talk
(With due regard to all that Hare revealed)
About the dismal ruins, half concealed,
Which weep the past, reluctant to remain;
Their only service maiden-hair to yield
To maiden albums, while our heads a rain
Of pebbles ill endured from Roman youth profane.

IX.

O humbled forum of a mighty age !
If e'er, attesting God, the very stones
Had need to cry instead of men, thy page
Of ruined art in truth would raise its moans
For all man's misused sway, to which the groans
Of martyrs would be requiem. Like a grave
New opened, with its few and scattered bones
And funeral tributes, does thy presence crave
The tears of those who love but can no longer save.

X.

A lowly desert mid a city's poor,
The stranger only seeks thee to explore
For treasures unseen of the vagrant boor,
Found by the loadstone of beloved lore,
And traced with hallowed zeal upon the floor
Of that old battle-ground of wise and strong
Whose lonely shafts Art studies to adore, —
And History points to, Time's drear way along,
Orations all in stone, or voiced with warrior's song.

XI.

Insatiate pride upon thy tortured plain
Has, at a word, made marble fanes aspire
In rival glory, rich in conquest's gain,
To, in a day, be crushed by vengeful ire,
Or in rebellion wrecked, or swept by fire
Of ruthless lords of men in giant strife,
Scorning a world to gratify desire,
Baring the breast of Virtue to the knife,
And making broken hearts their hour-glass of life.

XII.

These are no more, and now a race in shame
Rises like one recovered from a spell
Of evil spirits to restore its fame,
And seeks to gather up the gems which fell
From its mad hands, to guard them high and well,
And clothe itself in garments made anew,
That, when the world its history doth tell,
It may with happy eyes the present view,
And deem past honors pledged to dignity more true.

XIII.

Yet is its mood not always thus sedate :
The Carnival arrives with painted mask,
To scoff at grave ambition, and, elate,
Indulgence take which it would vainly ask
Of melancholy prelate,—irksome task
To thrust aside for unrestrained delight ;
Youth drinks but mirth from out the slender flask,
For daily frolic, and throughout the night
Th' unwearied dancers whirl in many a costume bright.

XIV.

The Corso, given up to pleasure's whim,
Yields Trade a captive bound in trappings gay ;
Rome's fairest faces overflow the rim
Of balconies unnumbered, and array
A mimie war with men, a storm of clay
In whitened pellets pouring, or in flowers
Exchanging kinder token. Then the way
Is coursed by frightened steeds, or evening hours
See tapers oft blown out ere red lips seek their bowers.

XV.

The gaudy chariots, ranged in bright parade,
Give end to pleasure, with the glow of fire
In many a rainbow hue subdued and made
The sport of men, as Samson, who in ire
Might, his true self, have swept with fury dire
The laughing throng before him. Thus the pride
And strength of soul that raise our natures higher
Must sometimes turn for witless mirth aside,
And of the respite gain an end at first denied.

XVI.

Now from the spell of Rome's eternal walls
Turn thou, my muse, a little while away
To where the sun with warmer influence falls,
And Naples basks beside her opal bay,
Loquacious in her oft-time holiday—
Forgetful in the present of a past
That dreams about her, wheresoever may
The wondering vision turn,—a treasure vast
Of history and song in loveliest setting east.

XVII.

Her teeming streets betoken little heed
Of outward peace. A merry people strive
By fair or foul to quell their simple need
Mid mud and flowers. Scaree can fate deprive
(Their food the highway fringing), and, alive
To mirth and music, leaving to the sage
Or stranger all the treasures of that hive
Of despoiled cities of full many an age,
They joy in song and dance on famed St. Carlo's stage.

XVIII.

Yet what a dread o'erhangs the landscape fair,
And the wide city stretched beside the sea,
While that dark mountain cone in upper air
Pours its pale cloud ! As some, by sad decree,
Fear death may come e'en mid the banquet's glee
In demon-haunted spasm, as some may fear
A birth of shame, a poisoned cup, a tree
Of torture, so, from trembling year to year,
Men smile with aching heart lest awful doom be near.

XIX.

Stern mountain ! it was on a cloudless night
When first we saw thee, and each tender star
About thy crest paled in the broader light
Of the full moon ; yet saw we from afar
Upon the azure sky a sulphurous bar—
Thy sullen throat evolving its own cloud
(E'en as grim sounds their self-made troubles mar),
And 'neath its folds the glow of fires avowed
Within thy burning breast to guilty penance bowed.

XX.

Ere many days, audacious we awoke
To scale thy black and life-accursing side,
Combating storms before our courage broke,
And naught of blissful vision was denied.
From Capri's purple rest to Naples' pride,
The vassal hills beyond, sweet vales between,
The shining sea where tiny vessels glide,
Each timid village mid its pastures green,—
All, as by angels' aid, in that bright hour were seen.

XXI.

But underneath our feet a monster lay
Whose life was desolation. Though asleep,
His angry murmurs gave the soul dismay,
While, from his ashen jaws, adown the steep
A hemorrhage of fire pouring deep
Curdled in smoking folds upon his side.
A countless host of monsters, heap on heap,
Seemed mid some awful struggle petrified
In the gnarled crust of that o'erwhelming lava tide.

XXII.

As the grim octopus, that being dread
Of unknown ocean, near some sombre cave
Cone-like reposes, with his lifted head
Eying the waters, and a living grave
Hid in his gliding arms, whence naught may save
The hapless victim, so Vesuve doth wait,
Clutching anon the beautiful, the brave,
In its wide fiery streams insatiate;
Fair fields and cities hid by swift remorseless fate.

XXIII.

Pompeii! the distressing task is thine,
And thine, sweet Herculaneum! to tell
The ages of disasters which enshrine
Your names forever. Terrors that befell
Your lives in few brief days, and made a hell
And then oblivion of your home delights—
A grave of all wherein you loved to dwell,
Exchanging emulous hours for gleeful nights,
Till death the curtain drew and quenched the theatre lights.

XXIV.

The mountain's wrath upon your glory came
In that dire time; nor ever malice sped
Amid the gaps of error as the flame
Of lava to your banquet and your bed;
Nor ever hath fierce tyranny o'erspread
The slave's seant joy as did the sombre pall
Of ashes drift on your distracted head,
With smothering horror merging wall to wall,
And whelming meekest age and weakest childhood all.

XXV.

Sealed up alike from Time's corroding touch
And man's unhallowing need by will divine,
Your shroud is lifted now, nor men too much
May marvel at revealings which combine
To marshal jealous centuries in line,
And prove the human heart as still the same,
The brain as active then, the skill as fine,
For life's essential joy; since Science came
That men might not lose hope from Art's declining fame.

XXVI.

Men marvel, for each thing of household use,
Each implement of toil or tradesman's need,
Of sport or skill or crafty war's abuse,
The artist's birth, the lawyer's blackened deed,
The baker's loaves, the farmer's varied seed,
All labor's products, countless in array,
Mock, to our gaze, Time's disappointed heed,
Raised, phoenix-like, from ashes to the day,
Where roofless walls yet vie in decoration gay.

XXVII.

But shop and temple, mill and rich abode,
Proud tomb and wheel-worn street, are all forgot
When we behold the sculptor's dextrous mode
Of casting nature's counterfeit, the lot
Of many a life revealing when the hot
And furious fall of ashes torture gave
To face and form crouched in some hapless spot
To find, unheard, uncomforted, a grave,
By gods renounced and man all powerless to save.

XXVIII.

O little maiden prostrate on thy face,
Or thou, in tender hope of motherhood,
Thy ring-pledged hand in vain imploring grace,
Or thou, old man, in calm submissive mood
Lain down to final sleep,—what thought of good
In heaven was yours mid that last bitterness
Of broken love and life? The heart's hot blood
Throbs as we view ye with a strange distress,
For pity knows not time when claiming love's redress.

XXIX.

Faint echo this, Pompeii! of thy woe;
And of thy joy, words vainly may pursue
The flight of fancy, as enthralled we go
About thy streets and all thy life renew.
All doors are open now: where once the few
Sought favor, we can enter without fear;
And where dwelt evil walk, remaining true;
And where the poor, find not a pleader near,
And where the player trod, no ringing plaudits hear.

XXX.

Yet, prostrate Herculaneum ! in thee,
Searee half unburdened of the lava tide
Which scorched thy very heart, our feet were free
To pace a stage which tunnelled masses hide
From the once-smiling sky. Nor was denied
A tumult, but it was the smothered roar
Of heavenly thunderings mocking human pride,
Sounding the depths appallingly, till more
Our cavern seemed some dread plutonian corridor.

XXXI.

Gladly we sought, when that weird storm had passed,
The treasure-plundered ruins 'neath a town
Which jealously o'erlooks them. Fate has cast
Sadly their lot, and at her adverse frown,
E'en the blue sea, which, where yon steps run down,
The slender feet of many a maiden kissed
In brighter days, has fled. The past renown
Of marble courts some roses only list
To keep in fragrance sweet ere they too shall be missed.

XXXII.

But do we these lost cities need to mourn,
Or clamor judgment ? Theirs was but the way
Of all that blue sea's borders. They were born
Where Nature urges pleasure ere delay
Wither to age ; and but a brief dismay
Led them, complete, to an immortal reign,
Unbowed but by the gods, with no decay
Of lingering years : their hourly life the gain
Of sages,—a bright tower on history's distant plain.

XXXIII.

They did not die like Perseus, seeking doom,
Bravely supreme of soul, for other's sake,
Fame's loved ideal, nor in all the gloom
Of long-sustained adversity partake,
Scarce less, enduring, of the thoughts which make
Men heroes—oft unknown except above.
No! but in chance and sudden call to break
Life's treasure-box so ruthlessly, they move,
Light-hearted, ill-starred hosts, to sympathetic love.

XXXIV.

With less dramatic tale, where Paestum stood,
In prosperous days, the southern coast along,
Three temples check the traveller as they brood
In calm and stoic dignity. The song
Of Grecian priests is ended, for the strong
Hath triumphed over beauty, save in these
Gray monumental stones which even wrong
Seem to forgive, in their deserted ease
Warmed by the genial sun and lulled by murmuring seas.

XXXV.

From their repose we turned, and northward rode
The devious way of that enchanting shore
Where nymphs and mermaids well might have abode,
And poets find their muses evermore;
Amid the glens and cliffs where streamlets pour
Their tribute to the sea in white caséade,
Where vineyards cling above the breakers' roar,
And fisher hamlets scarce their foam evade,
Grateful in summer days for yon steep mountain's shade.

XXXVI.

There stretches calm Salerno, and beyond
Amalfi nestles, loveliest of the band
Of white-robed sisters who, serene and fond,
Watch that bright coast with tender hand in hand ;
Where once these ruined towers made their stand
With anxious vigil 'gainst piratic greed,
Lured by the bounty which no stern command
Of the brown sower prompted from the seed,
And wealth of fortune's sons from civie tumult freed.

XXXVII.

Again we move, and leave Salerno's bay
And each fair haven loathfully behind,
Castellamare seeking, and away
To charmed Sorrento, where abruptly wind
Great ridges to the sea, and hold confined
In loved embrace that refuge pledged to peace
From dread Vesuvius, distantly defined
Across the wave, and Naples' gay surecease,
That spot where Tasso's muse ecstatic found release.

XXXVIII.

O lovely scene! it is a joy to live
Before thy influence. The pulse again
Beats to victorious march, and memories give
Enthrallment to each spot which owns the reign
Of happy Naples, waiting in her train
Each with some tribute of her glorious past ;
Each in its own bright beauty robed to gain
The pilgrim's homage, here by fortune cast,
Who counts all perils light while such beguilements last.

XXXIX.

The hills are set with gardens,—as with gems
A queen's tiara,—where serene await
The vacant halls of kings. Free pleasure stems
The wayward tide to, by the ocean gate,
Rest on those purple isles that float in state,
Swan-like, before the zephyr or the gale—
Fair Ischia and Capri, willed by fate
To yield the way to many a conqueror's sail ;
For Naples so beguiled, defence had light avail.

XL.

Phœnicians here, and Greeks, in ancient days
Drove their adventurous galleys to the shore ;
Resistless Rome possessed these lovely bays
And held patrician pomp ; the Spaniard bore
With haughty rule, forgetful of the Moor,
Upon the careless people ; but withal,
Peace wrought her crowns, surpassing those of war,
Blessed by the muses, whose seductive call
Drew an immortal line to Fame's unblazoned hall.

XLI.

What voice would venture to declaim the scroll
Which that charmed touch illumines ? to fitly sing
Not merely from the ostentatious roll
Of vaunted warrior, emperor or king,
In gilded armor passing, but to bring
The shade of Cicero to earth again,
Of learned Pliny, or to turn the wing
Of Virgil's spirit and of Dante's pain ?
Appalled, my muse but dwells on one fair woman's reign ;

XLII.

—Vittoria Colonna, on whose head
A crown of stars is shining in her praise.
Her guileless youth, in highest culture led,
Abused not those proud dignities that raise
The dizzy mind from truth, or knew the maze
Coneeit devises beauty to ensnare.
Love gave her noble heart no rude delays,
But with her childhood her Pescaro rare
Entered its priceless faith and learned a world to dare.

XLIII.

He rose a hero in his nation's wars,
And died, and with him all love's fever fled
From her deep heart forever, while his scars
In it had faithful counterpart, and bled
Through nights of childless grief. Then calmly spread
A cohort from the soul, aggressive armed
For noble deeds. Her ardent genius sped
To its high purpose, and a world was charmed
By that exotic verse which her pure love embalmed.

XLIV.

And not alone the riches of her song,
But her wide influence took a fuller grace.
All men were awed by genius which no wrong
Was kindred to, which sought with loyal face
Exalted natures only for a place
In her loved audience, which meekly bent
To cheer the crippled children in life's race,
And dared to use all power by heaven sent
To strip bedecked deceit from prosperous sin's intent.

XLV.

By the keen eye of virtue she discerned
With noble welcome each regard sincere
That pierced the mists of life, and bravely spurned
Those covert natures, disappointed, drear,
Which foster intrigue but at friendship sneer,
Unfitted for its benediction sweet,
Lacking the grace by which her voice could cheer
Alike the poor and outcast of the street,
Or weary souls whom men with ostentation greet.

XLVI.

Of such was Michael Angelo, whose age
Repelled, disdainful, malice-poisoned blame,
Nor heeded witless praise: an august sage
In Art's wide realm, whose dignity of fame
Set narrow hearts aside. Colonna came
With nature fitted his great soul to know,
Revering aspiration more than name
Or mighty handiwork,—as comes the glow
Of sunset on vast cliffs which then their glory show.

XLVII.

In her, ideal grace of heart and mind
Adorned ideal presence, and dispelled,
By guileless mirth and fancy unconfin'd
And noble thought, the doubt his spirit held
If worldly lusts and sophistries had quelled
All loveliness of nature evermore.
She gently smiled, and that true friendship swelled
Life's stream beyond the chilling years it bore,
And flowers of peace renewed their perfume on its shore.

XLVIII.

In such high presence let my muse repose
Upon the scenes which Memory surveys:
They fitly bring all glories to a close,
They fitly end the throng that Fame arrays;
—One the high chief of art, whose genius plays
With its fine snares and obstacles, and one
Italia's truest loveliness portrays,
As if in her fair womanhood alone
Nature would challenge all ideal Art had done.

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